

Take an Interest

April 18, 2013

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel them, and if long breathing feels comfortable, keep it up. If it doesn't feel comfortable, you can change. You can make a game of it, figuring out what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. What does your body need?

The breath is like free medicine. For the most part, we just throw it away, don't pay it any attention, and look for other medicine outside. But the way you breathe has a huge impact on the body and a huge impact on the mind. So it's good to explore it. Take some time to experiment. What does short breathing do to the body? What about longer breathing, deeper breathing, more shallow breathing, heavy or light, fast or slow? Mixing these things up in lots of different ways, you begin to gain a sense of the impact that the breathing has on your mind and your body.

That's an important lesson because then you can use the breath. When anger comes, when fear comes, when you're lying awake at night and can't get to sleep, you can focus on the breath. It's like having something to play with, or a friend to talk to at any time at all. And as with any friend, when you don't know the friend very well, you just sit there and you have no idea what to say. The friend doesn't know what to say. But after a while, you start asking questions, and the other person starts answering. If you don't ask the questions, there are no answers.

So you can ask questions about the breath. What kind of breathing would be good for your lungs? What kind of breathing would be good for your intestines? How about the tension in your shoulders or a pain in your back: What kind of breathing is good for that? As you get to know the breath, you realize it's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the whole flow of energy in the body. For the most part, we ignore it, and then we miss out on the benefits that can come from paying attention to these things. So take a while to sensitize yourself to this. In the beginning, it seems like nothing is happening, and it's very easy to get bored. But again, ask questions.

It's like listening to a talk. If the person giving the talk doesn't know what the people listening are interested in, he talks away on whatever strikes his fancy. But if you start asking questions, then you find out he's got things to say about the specific issues you've got. I myself found that the breath started getting interesting when I began to relate the whole idea of the breath energy to some long-term pains in the body. I had jumped out of a barn one time when I was a kid and

landed on a nail, which went right through my foot. From that point on, there was always a bit of tension in my right foot. When I began to realize that the breath energy in the legs could be used to relieve that tension, I learned that I could start dealing with other issues in the body, too.

Then, from the body, you start working into the mind. When you're feeling ill at ease, how are you breathing? When you're feeling that someone else is invading your space, to what extent is their breath energy invading your body? To what extent can you prevent that by filling the breath throughout the body and keeping the sense that this is your place? You're inhabiting your body.

There are lots of things you can do with the breath if you ask the right questions. Otherwise, it's just in, out, in, out, and nothing seems to be happening, and it gets boring pretty quickly. But if you play with it, your awareness of the present moment gets more solid. You can use it as a foundation that gives the mind a stable place to stay with a sense of well-being. Then you can watch the mind, and the movements of the mind are a lot more interesting than the movements of the breath. But again, these are things we tend to ignore.

When a thought tells us that this is right or that's wrong, we tend to go running out, looking at what's right and what's wrong. We don't stop and question: How did that thought come into the mind? Where is it coming from? Is it right? How did that thought develop?

This is not just an abstract question, because these are the thoughts that can take over the mind very easily. You find this particularly as you start facing illness or old age. Your mind can really run rampant. The things that the body used to be able to do, it can't do anymore. Where are you going to find any refuge or protection if not in your own mind? And if your mind is thinking all kinds of crazy thoughts, you can't really depend on that, either.

So you want to be able to look into the mind and see, when a thought forms, how does it form? Can you trust it? What kind of impulse is it coming from: something that's going to be good for you, or something that's going to be bad? Is it going to be good for somebody else, or bad for somebody else? What comes through your mind is not just your own business. It has an impact on what you do and say and think, and that's going to have an impact on other people.

When I was in Thailand, I was looking after Ajaan Fuang when he was sick. Even though the illnesses he suffered as he got older were pretty severe, his mind always seemed very steady. And even though the body was causing all kinds of pains, his mind was not paining him—not causing any suffering. I took that as a lesson. A couple of years later, I came back to visit my father. He was sick and I was looking after him for a bit. Most of his suffering was coming from his mind.

His illness wasn't nearly as bad as Ajaan Fuang's, but he suffered a lot more. It was then that I realized: The training of the mind really is important. It really does make a difference.

So the time you spend meditating—even though in the beginning it doesn't seem like anything much is happening—is time well spent. It's like making scrambled eggs. You turn the heat on really low, and you stir and stir and stir. For a long time, it seems as if nothing is happening, but gradually the eggs begin to coagulate. If you turn up the heat too high and try to get results really fast, what you get is rubber. For really nice, soft scrambled eggs, you have to keep them over low heat and be very, very patient.

So take some time to settle down. If the mind says, "This is boring," just see that as a random thought that's coming through. Let it go right through and go away. You don't have to believe it.

After all, if your own mind is boring, where are you going to find anything interesting in the world? The mind is what's shaping your experience of everything else, and you want to make sure it's shaping things rightly. It's like a filter. You want to know what it's filtering out. What is it allowing to come through? Is it filtering out the right things? Or is it filtering out the things that would be actually beneficial while it lets through the things that are not?

When you stay with the breath, you're in the present moment. You gain a sense of how to stay with the body in the present moment in a way that feels good and is actually good for the body. And because you're in the present moment, you get to see the movements of the mind. Even though the mind may be thinking about the past or the future, you see the process in the present moment.

It's like visiting a news studio. You watch the news on the TV, and you find that you tend to believe what they have to say. But then when you go and watch how the news gets filtered as it goes from the morning, up through the afternoon, and finally comes out in the evening, it gives you a very different perspective on what's being said. You see the process and you're less inclined to believe the outcome.

This is a very useful skill to have when your mind is telling you all kinds of things that could make you suffer. You realize the process leading to those thoughts that would induce suffering is not all that reliable, so why would you allow yourself to suffer from things you can't trust? Why do you believe them? Watching the processes allows you to see which thoughts are trustworthy and which ones are not. And you find that the ones that really are trustworthy are the ones that are *not* going to cause you to suffer. The ones that point out that even

though there may be problems in the body, the mind can still be okay: That's an important lesson to learn, and one you can trust.

So if you sit with the breath for a while, it's not that nothing's going to happen. It's just that things are gradually coagulating, coming together. If you take the time and watch and ask questions, you find that your sensitivity develops. It's a useful sensitivity for sorting through the processes of your own mind—and that's one of the most useful things you can learn.